GOD IS NO TRADITIONALIST
Isaiah 43:14-21
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Exactly one month before he finally issued the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln delivered a speech to the United States Congress. The date was December 1, 1862. It was an extraordinarily turmoiled and troubled time in the life of the nation and in Lincoln's personal life. He was struggling with the reluctant generals of the Army of the Potomac, and laboring under the daily and withering attacks of his critics and skeptics. His message to the Congress on the first day of December was a rambling, undistinguished discussion of the status quo, unimportant, until near the end when he said..."The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves..."

Among the remarkable attributes of Abraham Lincoln was his sense of history, his sharp awareness that what was occurring in the 1860's was new, unprecedented and that the situation required new thinking.

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It belongs to our humanity apparently to deal with uncertainty by looking back... Lincoln realized that the greatest threat to the future of the nation was a refusal to acknowledge and deal with the radically new situation in which history had placed his generation. Anxiety leads always to nostalgia. Stress modulates subtly into a sentimental romanticizing of the past. "Bake a memory", the commercial urges. It can be a comforting exercise. It can also be very dangerous. One writer observes: "Memory can seduce us into a wistful longing for friendlier, more comfortable, more secure times. It can entice us away from wrestling with the issues of the present. It is more inviting than a pilgrimage into a frightening future." (George Ramsey, Presbyterian Outlook, 1/25/81). A little less elegantly a character on the television show M*A*S*H one time likened nostalgia buffs to people who plaster their car windows with decals from all the places they have visited. "Their windows are so covered up with where they've been that they can't see where they're going." (Ibid.).

That dynamic is timeless. Lincoln worried about it in the 1860's. And a very long time ago a prophet of God wrote about it memorably to a people who had just about decided that the future looked so awful the only thing left for them to do was hang on to the traditions of the past for dear life. It was a desperate, frightful time for Israel. A mere remnant of a once proud nation was living in captivity in Babylon - a theme made poignantly contemporary by the fourteeen month captivity and release of fifty-two of our own countrymen. In the sixth century B.C., however, all that was left of God's chosen people had been in exile for a generation. The future did not look good for them at all. Young men and women were wondering why they weren't integrating themselves into Babylonian culture. It was a seductive proposal. Why not blend into the environment? Why keep on practicing their peculiar rituals? The elderly, on the other hand, sensed the very end of the race should that happen and clung even more tightly to the traditions, customs, and memories of the past, a theme explored brilliantly in Fiddler on the Roof. Worst of all, for the exiles in Babylon, however, was a new uncertainty. Their captors were beginning to fade, of all things. Their only security was about to be taken away. The new power in the area was Persia and everyone knew that it was only a matter of time until Cyrus the Great exercised his sovereignty even over Babylon. That was a frightening promise. No one knew what might happen then. Cyrus might just execute the house guests of his latest subjects. Nothing about the prospect looked good.

And so the prophet wrote to them in cadences of pure poetry: "Comfort, comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and say to her that her warfare is ended." In the process he gave later generations priceless images of God and His way with us. "Behold my

servant. I have put my spirit upon Him, He will bring forth justice to the nation." His theological legacy would become a treasure whenever God's people faced uncertainty or danger..."Those who wait for the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not grow faint." Israel had always leaned heavily on the past to help define the present. The Jews were and are a people who remembe So the prophet wrote to the captives in Babylon about the God who once led them out of another bondage, the God who made a way in the sea. The memory of the Exodus from Egypt was the most powerful reality in the religion of Israel. The prophet affirmed it, celebrate it, but then, with no warning, with stunning immediacy:

"Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing:
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

The past is remembered, revered, and honored - but never as an end in itself. The prophet calls the people to remember what God once did in order to honor him and watch for the new things He will do in the future. God, that is to say, is no traditionalist. His people may be looking for Him in their venerable customs and revered memories. But He, God himself, is already somewhere out in the future.

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It belongs to our humanity, however, to deal with uncertainty by looking backward, not forward, and one would be hard pressed, frankly, to locate a more uncertain time than the one in which you and I must do our living. I attended the Global Conference of the World Future Society last summer in Toronto; a remarkable conclave of scientists, inventors, business people, educators, government officials, from all over the world. It was a very hopeful affair. Everyone of the six thousand people who went to the trouble of attending did so out of some sense of commitment to the future. But it was also a profoundly disturbing and unsettling experience for middle class Americans who have a major stake in the status quo. It is apparent to anyone who thinks about it for very long that the only certainty about the immediate future is protracted uncertainty. The times they are truly "a-changin", much faster than they were when Bob Dylan added that phrase to the vocabulary of the 1960's. The conference was dominated by the thinking of scholars like Alvin Toffler whose book Future Shock sensitized us to the quantum changes ahead, and whose most recent book The Third Wave argues persuasively that we are at the end of the Industrial Age. In economic theory there are reputable scholars suggesting that the two major schools of thought have been shown conclusively to be obsolete, one leading to unemployment, the other to inflation. Someone has to think anew economically. There are political scientist observing what is happening today in Poland and China and concluding that we are watching vast social and political change, perhaps the beginning of the end of Communism as a viable system of government. In communications we are at the exciting start of a revolution Some are so far ahead that others of us are left breathless. At the Toronto conference one group was inviting others to join in a computer network for continuous dialogue about communication technology. Technology makes it possible to talk together. The group was touting the experiment as the future's version of today's printed journal because change happens so rapidly in this field a printed journal is obsolete before it is delivered.

Now, all of that can be disturbing. I confess that much of it was for me. I experienced the seductive power of the past, the comforting simplicity of 1960 or 1950 or the 1940's for that matter. And knowing a bit of Old Testament I found myself, on more than one accasion on a Toronto subway mumbling words of the prophet... "Remember not the former things...Behold, I am doing a new thing; even now it springs forth."

There was a track at the conference devoted to religion. It was not very well attended, frankly. Frankly, it was dull. Frankly, it didn't seem to have much to say about the future. I kept returning to it, hoping for a relevant word, and invariably left

early to catch the excitement generated across the hall in seminars in architecture, environmental management, space technology. An article I read after the conference concluded that the religion track spent most of its time "arguing for the past."

The simple truth is that religion does that much of the time. We seem sometimes to be the custodian of our culture's customs and memories, the one place one can be reasonably certain nothing will change much from year to year, decade to decade. Now, let us be clear. Tradition is an instrument for staking out an identity. Memory is a precious religious reality. Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me." And much of both Christianity and Judaism is locating God in His gracious activity of the past. Only a fool despsies history. And only the insensitive cannot appreciate and be profoundly moved by the stories of our own past. But in the church it becomes an obsession - an end in itself. It was Martin Marty, I believe, who said that the seven last words of the church surely will be, "But we always did it that way." It's one thing to honor the past; it's another thing to praise the Lord only in tunes at least a century old. It's one thing to preserve the traditions; it's another thing to attempt to communicate what we believe in philosophic categories that haven't been used or understood much since the fourth century. It's one thing to keep the faith; it's another thing to answer pressing, critical ethical issues on the basis of realities that haven't existed for a century as the moral majority insists God wants it to do. In the past twenty years or so most of the churches I know simply refused to acknowledge what was happening in the music of youth culture for instance, and kept insisting that God only listens to one kind of melody. In the meantime poets, song writers, composers were creatively dealing with the themes that should have been occupying the church's attention - but rarely in church because we wouldn't let them in.

Well, God is no traditionalist. The dogmas of the quiet past are never totally adequate for the present and often down-right dangerous for the future. And so, in our time, you and I have to do what other people in other uncertain times had to learn to do and that is think differently, think in a new way. Bishop John A.T.Robinson who did just that in his book Honest to God, wrote that God seekers will find the waters very choppy, but that God will be found in the rapids as well as on the rocks.

I am concluding that most of us, in fact, when we think about God, do so in past tense. If we have a concept of God, it is located somewhere back in time. If we have a notion of creation, it sounds like something that God started and was completed a very long time ago. Let me suggest that those kinds of ideas need to change. And let me share with you two provocative quotations that helped me to focus. The first by a distinguished European theologian, Carl Braaten: "God's transcendence can be conceived today as the absolute power of the future. He comes to us not 'from above', but 'from ahead'." (See Ted Peters, Futures Human and Divine, p. 152). That is to say it's the Twentieth Century: we know that God isn't on a throne in the sky. It's not even helpful to try to conceptualize that point in past history when God created the world. In fact, why not think of God's creation as a pull from ahead, not a push from behind?

Ted Peters, Professor at Pacific School of Religion puts it clearly: "The power of creation is at the end, not the beginning. God did not create the world once upon a time as a watchmaker creates a watch, winds it up and then lets it run. Rather, creation is still going on. It is a process of being drawn toward a final future when everything will come into its full being..." IIbid., p.153).

For most of us that is a different way of thinking about God. But it leads, I submit, to hope; not anxiety and despair, but to profound hope about that future. It is what the ancient prophet meant when he wrote..."Remember not the former things...Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally expectant, forward-looking, hopeful. It is not, please understand, simple-minded, positive thinking. The Gospel is hopeful about the future because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that event in which we dare to believe God the creator confirmed His gracious power over every other authority and His presence always with us in life, in death, in life eternal.

Christian people have been indominatable when they have remembered that and when they lived in fellowship with the Risen Christ. 120 A.D., for instance, and Roman persecution was intensifying, and people were being burned to death - and hanged on crosses for their faith, and their weekly meetings were raided and dear ones beaten and friends were watched and even one's own children could unwittingly bring disaster on parents, relatives, friends. And one of them wrote a letter,as the prophet had done six hundred years before, this time in a cryptic literary code to fool the Romans, which it did utterly, and which we know as the Book of Revelation. Listen to what he said: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth...God will be with his people...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away...Behold I make all things new." (Revelation 21:1-5, excerpts

They understood, those brothers and sisters of ours nearly nineteen hundred years ago They understood, even as the beatings, arrests, torture and execution continued, that the God and Father of their Lord Jesus Christ was out there in the future drawing them to Him; that the future would be His come what may. And so have countless others, in similar circumstances across the years, known that the present may be lived and sometimes endured in hope because the future is God's. In the Roman Arena, in Nazi Concentration Camps, in Soviet Mental Hospitals, in American jails in the deep South in the 60's, in prisons in Brazil, in the American Embassy in Tehran, Christian people have understood...

"Remember not the former things...Behold, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

God is no traditionalist. You will find Him in the future. You will have to think in new ways, perhaps, to see what He is doing. But He has promised to be there.

None of us knows what lies ahead. We have concerns about our culture, our nation, our way of life. We're not at all certain that we like where the trends seem to be leading. Something Carl Sandburg wrote about Lincoln's generation rings true today: "It was sunset and dawn, moonrise and noon, dying time and birthing hour..."(Lincoln, The Prairie Years and The War Years, p.191). Nor do we know what lies ahead for our church, our families, ourselves. We can spend the time God has given us worrying about it. We can invest ourselves in the task of preserving the past and inevitably find ourselves lured into doing our living there as well. Or we can welcome tomorrow with head held high, eyes wide open, eager, anticipating, watching, expecting because we know our Lord and God is out ahead of us. That seems to me a better, and more interesting, and more faithful alternative by far.

Amen.

God eternal, the future frightens us. We have known You and seen You at work in the past. Give us faith now to expect Your love and grace in the days ahead. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.